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Testing Program Records Progress Of Long Beach Recreational Water Quality

Local Water Quality Improvements Supported By Surrounding Cities' Efforts, State Funding

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In a city that still struggles with a past reputation of poor recreational water quality, a collaborative effort by Long Beach city employees, elected officials and residents continues to improve the seven miles of coastline enjoyed almost year round.

This collaborative effort is reflected in the results of Long Beach's water quality program, which is under the direction of the Long Beach Health and Human Services Department's Environmental Health Bureau. The program provides data to support the improvement of beach water from the 5th Place beach downtown to the waters beneath the 2nd Street Bridge and Bay Shore.

According to Nelson Kerr, environmental health bureau manager, the city has seen a "fairly dramatic decrease in the number of [beach] advisories over this summer so far compared to 2010, looking at April, May and June."

Those statistics show five fewer closures April 2010 to April 2011, and one fewer closure May to May for the same years. There haven't been any closures this June, which Kerr said is significant compared to the 12 closures last June. "That's a good sign," he said. There have been no beach closures in July thus far.

Per state regulation, any beach visited by more than 50,000 people during the summer months must be monitored for bacterial levels in the water. The



Alemayehu Mengesha, registered environmental health specialist and cross-connection/water pollution control program specialist for the City of Long Beach, samples water at Alamitos Bay near 2nd Street and Bayshore on July 12 as part of weekly sample collections. (Photograph by the Business Journal's Thomas McConville)

state legislation AB411 mandates testing April through October, however Long Beach – like many Southern California beach cities – tests year round and at numerous sites.

In an effort to save money, the city cut 10 of the 25 testing locations after 2008, when then-Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger used a line-item veto to eliminate funding for recreational

water testing. Since then, the State Water Resources Control Board (SWRCB) has stepped up to fund municipal testing through this year.

The 10 locations eliminated were chosen for being what Kerr called "redundancies" in the program. Dr. Helene Calvet, the city's health officer, attested that the testing at today's 15 sites is sufficient and adequate to



In this before and after comparison, the image at the top was taken at Rainbow Harbor by the Long Beach Water Department on January 10, 2005, after heavy rains. The image above was taken in the same area on July 13, 2011. A significant amount of the debris seen in the water in the 2005 is now trapped by catch basins installed along the Los Angeles River, improving the recreational water quality in Long Beach. (Photograph by the Business Journal's Thomas McConville)

make an indication of water quality and safety, Kerr said.

The tests monitor bacteria levels using indicator organisms like coliforms. While these organisms might not be the actual ones that would make you sick, the idea is that if these organisms are proliferating, then there may be more harmful pathogenic organisms that are also proliferating, Kerr said. Samples collected are analyzed over an 18- to 24-hour period at the health department's laboratory. If sample results are outside state standards, the city re-samples the affected area until results are within those standards.

Runoff volumes and rainfall amounts continually impact water quality. Long Beach residents are advised by the health department to avoid all ocean water contact for a minimum of 72

hours after 0.1 inch of rainfall or more, especially at storm drain outlets, streams, lagoons and river mouths. When necessary, the health department posts warning signs on the beach and online to inform beachgoers of advisories or closures. This information is also posted on the city's hotline, 562/570-4199.

"The city really does take the issue [of water quality] seriously," Kerr said. "A lot of time and resources are used on this. . . . We work to do everything we can to keep the water safe and healthy."

Projects Improve Water Quality

The city has made several improvements to water quality through studies and projects, according to Tom Modica, director of government affairs and strategic initiatives for the city, who said a number of initiatives are underway.

Trash screens have been installed on nearly every storm drain leading to the Los Angeles River, which has been identified as the primary source for water contamination in Long Beach. The trash screens' project was funded with \$10 million of federal stimulus used in 16 of the 27 cities in the Gateway Council of Governments (COG) that lead to the river. Federal stimulus dollars also funded trash collection infrastructure at three pump stations along the L.A. River last year, including trash nets and a vortex separation system.

The city previously had a number of issues working with neighboring cities along the L.A. River, however today's relationships have shown "a lot of success now," Modica said. Over the next four years, the entire Gateway COG has agreed to install treatment trains on almost every storm drain for both the L.A. and San Gabriel rivers – a \$42 million project approved in February 2012. So far, city records show Long Beach has installed treatment trains on approximately 15 percent of the city's storm drains that lead directly to the ocean.

A county project to improve the storm drain at Termino Avenue is to be completed this year. Once finished, this \$22.6 million project will help improve water quality in the Colorado Lagoon – a body of water near Park Avenue and Appian Way that has consistently been a troublesome recreational water location.

The Colorado Lagoon earned a spot on nonprofit Heal the Bay's "Beach Bummer" list in 2010 due to consistently poor water quality. According to city reports, federal stimulus provided \$4.3 million to improve water quality at the lagoon. Information from Heal the Bay shows the state water board approved \$1,799,803 in funding for the Colorado Lagoon Restoration Project in 2010, and allocated an additional \$3.3 million earlier this year due to more widespread contamination than originally anticipated. The goals

for the project are to dredge and remove sediment, install pollution reduction equipment and install native plants where necessary.

Long Beach community leaders work to keep beaches clean through the city's litter abatement program, banning plastic bags and beach cleanups. According to Vice Mayor Suja Lowenthal, by addressing the beaches right after a storm event, volunteers who clean the beaches help prevent debris from washing back into the ocean during the twice-daily high tides.

"We are so much better at the visual debris and pollutants," she said. "In order to invite anyone to our beach, we need to address the public perception

issue." The Long Beach City Council recently approved an ordinance banning plastic bags, an item that came from Lowenthal's office. Lowenthal, who serves as the 2nd District city council representative, has a significant amount of beach in her district and organizes monthly beach cleanups.

The city's biggest challenge remains addressing the public perception of the beach water quality, Lowenthal said. From a policy standpoint, city officials have been actively working to develop a regional water quality management plan. This plan, which received \$950,000 in state funding earlier this year, includes Long Beach working with the Gateway COG to address all

aspects of water resources management regionally.

Although Long Beach's coastline is the most impacted of the cities in the Gateway COG, according to Lowenthal, visitors continue to come to Long Beach for events like the Long Beach Sea Festival, yacht cruises or other recreational water activities "because they believe Long Beach has come a long way."

"We don't wake up and see some other coastal city on the weather cam," Lowenthal said. "We need to recognize how far we've come and what we've become. There are some things we won't be just yet, but we don't write off our entire coastline for what it's not." ■